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# Old age in Vienna

[Vienna]

[1921]

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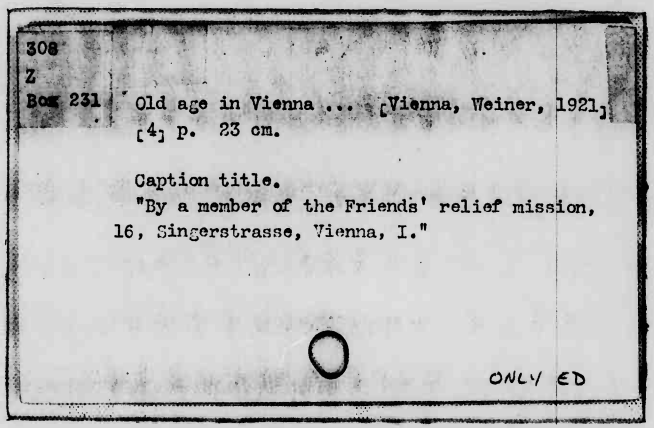

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Old age in Vienna ... [Vienna, Weiner, 1921]
[4] p. 23 cm.

Caption title.
"By a member of the Friends' relief mission, 16, Singerstrasse, Vienna, I."

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# Old age in Vienna.

To miss a meal at twenty is no more than a joke; at seventy it is a catastrophe.

In the prime of youth and vigour, the body may sometimes be neglected without harm; but, in the invalidism of old age, the smallest physical discomfort, a change even in accustomed routine, means actual suffering. More care, more skill, extra comfort, and greater charity are needed to help the traveller on the last phase of his difficult journey.

And yet old age should be, and often is, the most lovely season of all — and it is perhaps the aged, who are most able to appreciate life's beauty and glory.

Let us suppose that some malicious demon had determined to inflict the extremest sufferings on the most helpless victims. Such a desire could hardly be more perfectly realised than in the conditions of old age in Vienna to-day. To appreciate the actual depths of this misery much sympathy is needed, as well as firsthand knowledge of the facts, but a very slight sketch may help perhaps to give some idea of the present horror.

Like the other belligerents, Austria has gone through four and a half years of war. "When the war is over, the enemy must pay!". Well, the war is over, Austria has paid. She is bankrupt, dismembered, ruined, hopeless!

Such is the mental and moral outlook of those of her people whose lives are nearing an end; those who, if with nothing to look forward to for themselves, may still have consolation in the future of the young people around them. What of their material outlook? In Vienna, the once well-to-do upper middle classes have known famine for three years. Let us take at random a few of the cases visited by the English and American members of the Society of Friends (16, Singerstraße, Vienna 1), for the relief of the "Mittelstand"; and we shall understand something of the conditions under which they live.

Frau S., widow of a General and her daughter have a pension of 10.000 K, equivalent before the war to about £ 400

and now scarcely enough to cover the cost of their one daily meal in the people's kitchen. The daughter does all, even the rough work of the house, the washing of all linen and ironing, etc. Although they are selling their possessions one by one, they cannot afford to buy any eggs, butter, milk or such food as the under-nourished old lady most requires. The Mission worker found them on her visit almost desperate, not knowing how to pay their gas bill. These two old ladies never can afford coal or heat and use the gas most sparingly to make the tea (without milk) for their breakfast and for other such small necessaries.

Herr Y., a pensioned railway director and his wife, aged seventy and sixty-eight, have their principal meal at a "Gemeinschaftsküche" or people's kitchen, costing them 10 K a day. On Sundays, they eat sandwiches at home, as the Sunday meal costs 15 K. The cost of this single meal eats up their pension, and their savings are gradually disappearing. They cannot afford any heating or light.

Frau Marie D., the widow of a colonel in the Austrian Army has been bed-ridden for two years with bone-softening, due to under-nourishment. Her two daughters live with her, the elder earning 1000 K a month as clerk in an office; the younger does a little washing. The bread-winner has had an operation for cancer and must shortly have another. Both ladies eat at a "Gemeinschaftsküche" once a day — a meal consisting principally of vegetables; the mother has black bread and tea without milk or sugar, and what the daughters can bring home from their lunch.

Frau Maria and Ludowika X., aged seventy and seventy-five, live on the pension of their elder sister whose husband was a government official. They had been in lodgings, but were obliged to move, and now have no furniture, except what the neighbours can lend them. One sister sleeps on straw; the other on the floor.

Frau Baroness K., aged seventy-two, and her sister of seventy live in a beautiful apartment. They now sleep in one room; and with the money they receive from letting the others, they pay their rent. No dividends come to them now. They are gradually disposing of their furniture, carpets, pictures, etc. They have no servant but keep the place exquisitely clean and neat. They cannot afford either heat or light. They both eat at the people's kitchen, one meal a day.

Frau M., aged sixty-eight, widow of a state official, lives with her old sister and her daughter on a pension of 3000 K a year. Both these ladies suffer from softening of the bones from



under-nourishment. Fräulein M., the daughter, now makes use of her musical education by giving piano lessons at 10 K an hour. All three eat at the people's kitchen, dividing two portions between the three.

Frau T., widow of a lawyer, lives in an attic and now turns her power of doing exquisite needlework to account. She is paid 8 K an hour for the very finest petit-point; 4 K an hour for the larger Gobelin stitch. She cannot afford heat, and the electric light costs almost as much as she can earn by her work.

Frau M., widow of a judge, has a pension of 213 K a month. She is so weak from under-nourishment that she is unable to move. This old lady has now parted with nearly all her valued possessions, old silver, furniture, etc. She has a faithful old servant who earns money for her mistress by going out to do laundry work, etc.

Dr. M., sixty-five, and his wife have no servant. The wife is delicate and nearly all the housework, cooking, etc., is done by himself. Before the war, he retired on private means; now he is endeavoring to regain some of his old practice, but it is difficult. His patients can pay very little. He has been unable to buy any clothing whatsoever; his old friends have tried to help him by giving him some of their own old clothes — but they have little enough for themselves. He was formerly a "primararzt" — specialist at a hospital. They never can afford butter, eggs or any meat at all. They can only very rarely have a fire.

Can nothing be done to relieve such misery? Yes, something has been and is being done by the Friends Relief Mission. Old age pensions are granted to "Mittelstand" cases, consisting of fortnightly rations of groceries; and in cases where the houses are quite unheated, 250 K for fuel. Out of the many thousand cases needing relief, not all can be aided, and the help given may seem miserably inadequate to the need. But how much that little means to those who receive it!

Let us visit the "Hofburg" one Wednesday morning, the morning of the fortnightly distribution of food. An old man, a retired naval officer of seventy, comes up with the card of recommendation in his hand. He is told that he may draw rations once a fortnight and is given one small bag of flour, a small quantity of fat, a packet of cocoa, two tins of condensed milk, a little macaroni and rice, and a piece of soap. The old man looks at the rations and stands there speechless. "Come again in a fortnight", he is told, "and you will be given the same again". Still he stands there, dazed and stupified. "A fortnight", he repeats mechanically,

"a fortnight", — but makes no effort to move. He is struck dumb by a miracle too overwhelming to be believed.

A tall old lady, bent, in good clothes but worn, of distinguished presence, but trembling like a leaf and scarcely able to stand for weakness, totters into the room. "I was so touched and excited by your letter", she exclaims in very good English, — "that I could not sleep all night". The food-rations are put into a bag — too heavy for her trembling arms; she looks at the condensed milk, a tin of which costs 110 K in Austria (£ 5 in pre-war value) — "I think you are angels from Heaven", she exclaims, and bursts into tears. They are tears of purest thankfulness. But they shame the workers — shame them to their very souls — at the thought that such meagre charity, a handful of the barest necessities, should bring such disproportionate joy. For these people have never before received charity, have all their lives been accustomed to give. And, beneath their abounding gratitude, the never failing exquisite Austrian courtesy, is a deep-seated sensitiveness and a frequently lacerated pride. The Mission worker, who accompanies the old lady to her tram, is anxious to pay for her fare — for a ticket costs 5 K almost half the price of a meal. The tram approaches; there is no time to go to an office and buy a book of tickets. Awkwardly the worker thrusts some kronen into the old lady's hand. "If you please — not money" the old lady implores, "Not money — I beseech you." Food she will accept, but the idea of money is more than she can bear.

Is it worth while helping to keep these old people from starvation? Perhaps, in a strictly rationalistic regime, it would be better to save the children and the productive members of the community only, and let the aged perish. But we live in the world as it is, and their death is not sudden, but full of misery and pain.

When, after a long life, an old man or woman passes away peacefully and without suffering, surrounded by every comfort and care, the mourners however bereaved, are harrowed by no sense of wrong. But when old age is allowed to die of slow starvation, of exhaustion, weakness, and bitter cold — to die like a stricken animal, begging for a little warmth, crying for a crumb of bread — such a death must surely shame the conscience of all humanity, and make the very angels weep.

23728

February, 1921.

By a member of the Friends' Relief Mission, 16, Singerstrasse, Vienna, I.

J. Weiner, Vienna

Dies darf in Ihre Sammlung

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